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Ex-Sen. Baker Replaces Regan at White House

President Tries to Repair Damage; Ousted Aide Walks Out

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President Reagan yesterday sought to repair his damaged presidency by naming former senator Howard H. Baker (R-Tenn.) as his chief of staff, an action which triggered an angry walkout from the White House by Donald T. Regan.

Regan, who had sought to hold on as chief of staff for at least another week, learned late in the afternoon that he had been replaced when national security adviser Frank C. Carlucci rushed into his office to tell him that Baker's appointment had been announced on network television, sources said. One source said Regan "blew a fuse" at the news, had a one-sentence letter of resignation typed out and "stormed out" of the White House.

A senior White House official said that the president had not called Regan to tell him of Baker's appointment. Asked why Carlucci had gone in to relate the news to Regan, the senior official said, "I assume he thought he was being helpful."

The appointment of former Senate majority leader Baker, praised by the president in a statement as "a distinguished American . . . of unquestioned integrity and ability," was the first of a series of steps planned by Reagan to restore confidence in his presidency. Administration and congressional sources said the next is likely to be withdrawal next week of the nomination of Robert M. Gates as director of central intelligence.

Gates has come under sharp attack in his Senate confirmation hearings for his role in the Iran-contra affair. And Reagan was told by Republican congressional leaders yesterday that Gates is unlikely to survive what promises to be a bruising Senate floor fight on his nomination. A senior administration official said that Gates may withdraw his name from nomination to prevent such a fight.

Reagan held a strategy meeting with friends at the White House to discuss other ways to recover from

the damage inflicted by the report of the Tower commission, which offered scathing criticisms of Reagan's conduct of the Iran-contra initiative and his lack of management.

Four Republican congressional leaders met with the president and White House officials yesterday morning and told Reagan, in the words of one participant, that he would "do himself a lot of good" by taking blame for the Iran initiative when he addresses the nation on television Wednesday.

Reagan listened quietly to these comments. In past meetings, according to one source, Reagan has argued whenever this point has been made to him.

Attending this morning meeting were Senate Minority Leader Robert J. Dole (R-Kan.), House Minority Leader Robert H. Michel (R-Ill.), Sen. Malcom Wallop (R-Wyo.), Rep. Dick Cheney (R-Wyo.), Carlucci, legislative affairs director Will Ball and Dennis Thomas, an aide to Regan, who was still chief of staff at the time.

Without identifying Baker, the president told the lawmakers, all of whom had at various times pressed for Regan's resignation, that he had made a selection for chief of staff that would please them.

For several days Republican sources and senior administration officials had been saying that the embattled Regan would be gone by Friday. The Tower report added to the pressure on the president by finding that Regan "must bear primary responsibility for the chaos that descended upon the White House" after disclosure of the Iran initiative.

But sources said the principal factor that pushed Regan out of the White House was his feud with First Lady Nancy Reagan, which culminated in Regan's criticism of her at a senior staff meeting on Feb. 20.

"The criticism of his wife was a decisive event for the president," said one source close to Regan.

Despite the First Lady's opposition and the Tower report, Regan believed he had an understanding with the president that would allow

him to stay through next week. One source said he wanted to be allowed to remain as long as April 1. Regan's hopes for eking out a few more days in the White House appeared to be boosted during the week when former transportation secretary Drew Lewis and former senator Paul Laxalt (R-Nev.) turned down overtures to become chief of staff.

After telling Reagan Thursday that he did not want the job, Laxalt returned to his office, discussed other possibilities with Republican national chairman Frank J. Fahrenkopf Jr. and came up with the proposal to make Baker the chief of staff, according to informed sources. When Laxalt broached the idea, Reagan responded that it was "a hell of a good idea," one of these sources said.

Baker, who had earlier rejected an offer to become Central Intelligence Agency director, was vacationing in Florida with his wife Thursday evening when he received a call from the president offering him the job. Accompanied by Laxalt, Baker came to the White House at 1:30 p.m. yesterday and after 20 minutes of discussion with the president accepted the offer.

"If a president of the United States—particularly a president . . . who presently has significant problems—asked you to do a major undertaking, you have a responsibility to do that," Baker said at a news conference in his Washington law offices.

Apparently, no one conveyed the news of Baker's hiring to Regan, whose spokesmen had been telling reporters for days that Reagan and Regan would meet next week to "discuss the future." But the story spread rapidly. According to some sources, it was helped along by Nancy Reagan, who has been trying for three months to prod Regan to quit.

After his long fight to stay, Regan left in a hurry, issuing a one-sentence letter of resignation that contained no praise for the presi-

dent who had defended him against all critics for months. "I hereby resign as chief of staff to the president of the United States," said the letter, which was signed, "Respectfully yours, Donald T. Regan."

Despite Regan's manner of departure, the White House press office issued a formal statement by the president in which he said that Regan had come to him many months ago to say he would like to resign. The statement said Regan changed his mind after the "revelations about Iran" and "indicated he would like to stay and help me and the administration through the investigations. Last week he indicated he would like to go through with his original plans to return to private life."

Republican sources said Regan had battled for what one of them called "a presidential blessing" when he left. He was given less than he sought, but the departure statement did say that Regan had "served the nation with distinction" and referred to him as a "friend and associate who had always put the nation's interests first."

In contrast, Reagan praised Baker elaborately and said he was "enormously pleased that he is willing to take on this responsibility and to help me organize the White House staff for an aggressive two years of work."

Baker, who will enter the White House on Monday accompanied by longtime aides James Cannon and Tom Griscom, is expected to provide the kind of collegial and consultative leadership that was a frequent feature of Reagan's first term but has been rare in his second. Nu-

merous aides who came to the White House with Regan—and were collectively known as "the mice"—are expected to leave soon.

The selection of Baker was widely praised on both sides of the aisles of Congress yesterday. Sen. David L. Boren (D-Okla.), chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, said, "Howard Baker is absolutely the best possible choice that could have been made. . . his appointment is good news for the country." Cheney called the selection "an inspired choice—Baker arrives on the job with more broad-gauged experience than just about anybody you can name."

In contrast, there were warnings from Democrats and Republicans that Gates is unlikely to be confirmed as CIA director. Both Dole and Sen. Patrick J. Leahy (D-Vt.) said that Gates' nomination is "in trouble." Sen. Sam Nunn (D-Ga.) said Gates' chances have been hurt by the Tower report and that the odds are now slightly against him.

Republican sources said that Reagan has made no final decision but is inclined to avoid a confrontation with the Senate over Gates at a time he is trying to restore his presidency. Brent Scowcroft, national security adviser in the Ford administration and a member of the Tower board, was mentioned by some sources as a possible nominee if Gates withdraws.

Washington attorney Edward Bennett Williams said earlier that he had told the president he has no interest in being CIA director.

Staff writers David Hoffman, Helen Dewar and James R. Dickenson contributed to this report.